

How to Delegitimize a Nation

Kirsch has contributed a fascinating, beautifully written book that illuminates how we got to this dismal place, and provides hope for finding our way out.

By Kathleen Hayes

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For today's anti-Zionist, Palestine isn't a place so much as a metaphor. Whatever someone sees as humanity's biggest threat, that's what Palestine is about. Galvanized by global warming? That's what Palestine means. (Hi, Greta Thunberg.) Hate racism? That's what Palestine means. (Greetings, Black Lives Matter.) Passionately opposed to reactionary patriarchal cisheteronormativity? That's what Palestine means. (Salutations, Queers for Palestine.) That these beliefs defy readily available facts — that tiny Israel contributes almost nothing to global warming but might provide the scientists to fight it; that it's one of the most diverse countries in the world, with equal rights for all citizens; that self-described “queers” thrive in Tel Aviv but are murdered in Gaza — is irrelevant. The mutability and emptiness of the charges poses a serious problem for those who believe the Jews have the right to a state, and the right to live. Because how do you combat a metaphor?

Adam Kirsch has written a slim, eloquent book about how Israel-Palestine was transformed from a notoriously complex region into a simple, Manichean battle between good and evil. Performing the herculean task of erasing from this conflict all history, geography, material reality and human action, we find the motherlode of contemporary antisemitism, academia. Arcane ideas that percolated in the ivory tower for decades found their way into the mainstream progressive worldview, so that anyone who challenges these ideas today is regarded as an enemy of progress and the oppressed.

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Kirsch zooms in on a once-niche ideology, “settler colonialism.” Readers who hadn't come across the term before have certainly encountered it since Oct. 7, when “pro-Palestinian” protesters took to the streets, campuses and social media to howl that the “resistance” is always justified, because Israel is a “settler colonial” country. When they screamed that teenagers dancing at the Nova festival were “settler colonialists” so deserved to die, they were giving an especially vile interpretation to this once-obscure academic concept.

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somewhere that all nations are founded on a mountain of skulls. Maybe it's apocryphal, but that idea, anyway, was conventional wisdom in the Marxist party I once belonged to. Nation building is an inherently bloody business: the Western left used to acknowledge this. They even used to recognize that the West didn't have a monopoly on this; nations made up of nonwhite people could colonize, expel and subjugate others, too. You could feel great sympathy for the peoples who lost out in the battle against more powerful armies, but there was no point railing against history. All nations have the right to self-determination: The left used to insist on this, too. Once a nation was established, dwelling on the nature of its birth amounted to denying that right.

Settler colonial ideology evolved to justify excluding one nation (guess which) from the global community. When academics began writing about settler colonial societies in the 1970s, they meant countries like Algeria or Rhodesia: places where white people from a more powerful mother country subjugated the native population. Decolonizing those countries was violent but fairly straightforward, because the "colonists" had a place they could, at least in theory, return to.

In the 1980s and '90s, however, settler colonial ideology underwent what Kirsch calls "a crucial shift." It began, interestingly, in Australia, where academics began using the term to refer to themselves: part of a white, European-descended population that had largely replaced the indigenous peoples. Settler colonialism had taken place so thoroughly that white Australians now thought of themselves, illegitimately, as natives. This new definition of settler colonialism was then extended from Australia to other countries where the native population had been largely wiped out, Canada and the United States: nations hopelessly tainted with original sin.

Again, this represents quite a shift from many previous left teachings. As a young Marxist in the 1980s and '90s, I was taught that America's original sin wasn't the genocide of the Native Americans, but chattel slavery. My comrades saw Native Americans as pitiable figures, but now socially marginalized. Black Americans, on the other hand, were central to the American economy as workers, traditionally militant and had fewer illusions in American democracy. We had every reason to look to them to be the vanguard of radical struggle, and reject signs that racism might actually be improving. In making slavery the rotten core of American nationhood, my little Marxist group had plenty of company on the left. The idea still has many adherents, including The New York Times' 1619 Project.

According to the new idea of settler colonialism, *all* non-Native Americans are guilty by birth. I was startled to read that according to



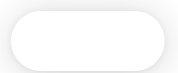
ancestors came to the country as slaves “benefit from the settler-colonial system.” It’s hard to see how people who believe in this stark declaration of guilt square it with other aspects of the progressive program, like supporting Black Lives Matter.

But intellectual consistency doesn’t seem to be these folks’ strong suit, so sure as the sun rises in the east, settler colonial ideology began taking aim at Israel. Australia, Canada and the United States clearly aren’t going anywhere, after all; nothing can really be done about the past except avow one’s guilt through endless land acknowledgements. The tiny Jewish state, on the other hand, attacked by enemies throughout its nearly 80 years, can be deemed inherently illegitimate, with the hope of reversing history and establishing a “Free [of Jews] Palestine, from the River to the Sea.”

Calling Israel a settler-colonial society requires both mental gymnastics and some awesome disappearing acts. Among these are that Jews actually are indigenous to Israel; Jews who emigrated to Palestine or Israel were generally fleeing antisemitism, not setting up colonies on behalf of Poland, Iraq or wherever; and establishing the State of Israel involved a fierce process of *decolonization*. As Kirsch writes, if Israel were a colonizing power, the Palestinian people should be able to win by using the tactics of the Vietcong or Algerian FLN, “sap[ping] the colonizer’s will to resist. But the fact is that Israel’s 7 million Jews have no other home to go home to. They or their ancestors left their former countries after suffering persecution and genocide, never to return. That is why they will fight for their country, not like the French in Algeria or Vietnam, but like the Algerians and Vietnamese.”

In a thought-provoking final chapter, “Justice and Despair,” Kirsch writes about the necessity of acknowledging the past and its injustices without hopelessness, or pretending they were “actually justice in disguise.” This means accepting that “while the creation of the United States and Israel was a curse to some people, it has been a blessing to many others.” The European settlement of America should not be undone, “but Native peoples should have the power to define and protect their way of life.” Similarly, “the creation of the State of Israel should not be negated, but Palestinians should have the security and dignity of their own homeland.”

How this might happen, of course, is a question for another book, or a library of them. Kirsch has contributed a fascinating, beautifully written book that illuminates how we got to this dismal place, and provides hope for finding our way out.



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